Speech delivered by Mr. Kox on 19/11/16

At The International Summit: For a Plan B in Europe, Copenhagen

<http://euro-planb.dk/?lang=fr>

Good to be back in Copenhagen!

Thanks for inviting me to this international conference on ‘*Alternatives to the Europe of austerity*’. I will answer in my contribution your question *whether austerity politics are undermining social and democratic rights of European citizens.*

The short answer is: *you bet, they do*!

In the next ten minutes I will explain this, whereby my reference regarding social and democratic rights of European citizens will be what is enshrined in the binding conventions on human, social and economic rights of the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe[[1]](#footnote-1) is Europe’s oldest treaty organisation with a focus on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The organisation is considered, also by the European Union[[2]](#footnote-2), as the continent’s leading human rights organisation.

Founded in 1949 after an appeal of Winston Churchill himself, the organisation nowadays unites 47 European states, from Iceland to Turkey and from Portugal to Russia. These states have obliged themselves, all 47, to respect, protect and guarantee these fundamental human rights of their citizens in Europe.

The Council of Europe has two statutory bodies: a *governmental* one, its Committee of Ministers[[3]](#footnote-3), formed by all 47 foreign affairs ministers, and a *parliamentary* one, its Parliamentary Assembly[[4]](#footnote-4), in which all parliaments of the 47 member states are represented by national elected parliamentarians. By the way: the Assembly has five political groups, the smallest - but smartest - of it being the Group of the Unified European Left, which I have the honour to preside since 2007.

The Parliamentary Assembly, which meets every 3 months in Strasbourg, is entitled to deliver *resolutions* and *recommendations*, which often lead, after due time, to new Council of Europe *conventions*, formulated by the Committee of Ministers*.* If and when ratified, these conventions become part of the national legislation. The main conventions are the *European Convention on Human Rights[[5]](#footnote-5)* and the *European Social Charter[[6]](#footnote-6)*. Together they form the only *real* European Constitution, for the 820 million citizens of Europe.

The Assembly, with its 315 members from national parliaments, has the privilege to elect the 47 judges of the *European Court on Human Rights*, which gives binding judgments when European citizens consider their human rights violated. Hundreds of thousands of citizens already appealed to this unique Court, and every year thousands of new judgments are given by it, obliging member states to follow up these binding verdicts. Other conventions have other mechanisms to ensure that member states live upon their obligations. For example the European Social Charter, which is seen as the counter part of the Human Rights Convention in the sphere of social and economic rights, is supervised by the European Committee of Social Rights.

The Parliamentary Assembly is also entitled to elect the *Council of Europe’s Human Rights Commissioner*. His mandate is to observe everywhere in Europe whether human rights are respected and to assist member states in the implementation of the Council of Europe *human rights standards*.

And it is this Human Rights Commissioner, at the moment Mr Nils Muižnieks from Latvia, who concludes in his recent report on ‘*safeguarding human rights in times of economic crisis*’[[7]](#footnote-7) that indeed ‘*austerity measures across Europe have undermined human rights*.’ According to our Human Rights Commissioner, ‘*many governments in Europe while imposing austerity measures, have forgotten their human rights obligations, especially the social and economic rights of the most vulnerable, the need to ensure access to justice and the right to equal treatment*.’ The Commissioner concludes that ’*national decisions on austerity measures and international rescue packages have lacked transparency, public participation and democratic accountability*’.

The austerity measures in Europe threaten, according to him, ‘*over six decades of social solidarity and expanding human rights protection across Council of Europe member states*.’ According to his report*, ‘austerity measures have exacerbated the already severe human consequences of the economic crisis marked by record levels of unemployment. Austerity has affected the whole spectrum of human rights and many vulnerable groups have been affected disproportionately*.’

Commissioner’s Muižnieks’ conclusions on the relation between austerity and human rights in Europe are very much in line with the conclusions of several reports we, the Unified European Left, have presented to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in recent years.

Andrej Hunko from the German Left Party described the clear danger of austerity measures to democracy and social rights[[8]](#footnote-8) and its negative effects on fundamental rights, such as collective bargaining and the right to strike[[9]](#footnote-9).

Nikolaj Villumsen from the Danish Red Green Alliance stipulated the undeniable relation between crisis, austerity measures and growing inequality in Europe.[[10]](#footnote-10)

I myself presented a report on the many threats austerity measures cause to public service all over Europe.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The good news is that all our reports on the negative effects of austerity policies in Europe received broad support from other political groups and national delegations. All our resolutions we did present until now on this issue have been adopted by a very large majority of the Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg.

Austerity is not an EU invention. We better can call it a neoliberal recipe to cut spending to public services and social welfare in order to give more profitable possibilities to modern capitalism on ever less regulated and ever more expanding markets.

This policy of austerity intoxicated in the ‘80ties of last century the United States and the United Kingdom and then after it became the ideological basis under the European Union, which started 25 years ago, in the Dutch city of Maastricht.

There, Heads of State and Government of 10 European countries agreed in December 1991 on the so called ‘*Maastricht-treaty’*, which put postwar European cooperation on a complete different track, heading for a *full-fledged economic, monetary and political union*.

 ‘*A giant step towards a more united Europe’*, the treaty was called in 1991 by my compatriot Max Kohnstamm, who was for over 25 years one of Jean Monnet’s closest colleagues and vice chair of Monnet’s *United States of Europe-committee.*

I myself called it, at the same time, while demonstrating and protesting in cold and rainy Maastricht with a handful of friends, *a decisive step towards superstate Europe, which would severely harm democratic and social rights of the citizens of the new Union*. Let me be fair with you: really nobody was interested in *our* dark prediction at that time.

And perhaps it was a bit exaggerated, as only 10 states were involved at that time. But remember, the Maastricht treaty on the creation of the *new European Union* was agreed in the same month the *old Soviet Union* evaporated, opening a huge new space to explore for European capitalist companies.

The Maastricht Treaty therefore already envisaged the extension of the new Union to the rest of Europe – as happened in the years to follow. Within 15 years the Union absorbed almost all of Scandinavia and central Europe and expanded its eastern borders to the Russian Federation and Turkey. Later Croatia was included, and negotiations are going on with the other remaining Balkan states and Turkey. EU-association treaties have been agreed with Moldova and Georgia, and Ukraine, be it that the majority of the voters in my country have rejected that treaty and thus the Dutch government could not yet ratify it.

The European Union orders its member states, to balance their budgets and lower their public debt. Less than 3% budget deficit and a public debt less than 60% of GDP have become *the holy figures of the EU*, to quote Susan George. To respect these holy figures means: to cut public spending, to lower wages and to strangle post war welfare state, and to privatize important parts of the public domain.

Due to its economic magnitude, it is the European Union which is the main producer of austerity policy, both within and outside its borders. And therefore the European Union is the main contributor to the fact that, as Commissioner Muižnieks states, human rights, in particular social and economic rights, especially of the most vulnerable groups, have been undermined. If the European Union would have acceded to the European Convention on Human Rights (as the Lisbon Treaty obliges to), citizens would probably already have applied to the European Court on Human Rights because the EU violates their human rights, by way of the austerity policy it imposes to all its member states and citizens.

So, my long answer to the question whether austerity policy is undermining social and democratic rights of European citizens, remains in line with the short answer I gave at the beginning of my intervention: *you bet they do!*

Allow me to conclude my intervention, referring to the title of this most relevant conference: Alternatives to the Europe of austerity are not only *desirable* but even *obligatory* if we want to respect the human rights-obligations *all* Council of Europe member states – including *all* EU-member states - have taken upon themselves!

This means that if we *want* to respect human rights in Europe, we *have* to end austerity and – in the words of the European Commissioner on Human Rights *-we have to reinvigorate the European social model based on the foundation of human dignity, inter-generational solidarity and access to justice for all.* Please inform all your governments of the findings of Commissioner Muižnieks. And tell them this simple truth: *You can’t run with the hare and hunt with the hounds!*

1. http://www.coe.int/en/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Memorandum of Understanding Council of Europe – European Union, art. 10: ‘The Council of Europe will remain the benchmark for human rights, the rule of law and democracy in Europe.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.coe.int/en/web/cm [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. http://assembly.coe.int [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention\_ENG.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.coe.int/en/web/turin-european-social-charter [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&InstranetImage=2933785&SecMode=1&DocId=2215366&Usage=2 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-DocDetails-EN.asp?fileid=18745&lang=EN [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-DocDetails-EN.asp?fileid=21346&lang=EN [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-DocDetails-EN.asp?FileID=21343&Lang=EN [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-DocDetails-EN.asp?fileid=20924&lang=EN [↑](#footnote-ref-11)